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Vélorutionary?

Martin Ryle

The Montreal cyclists who in the mid-1970s formed an advocacy group known as *Le Monde à Bicyclette* also referred to themselves as *vélo-Quixotes* and *vélorutionaries*.¹ The bicycle, in its surprising persistence through the twentieth century, became an emblem of alternative ideas, and chronologies, of progress: how many other complex machines that approached their mature form during the lifetimes of Nietzsche and Engels are still used every day by people all over the world? In the ever-expanding zone where the car rules, cyclists have kept open a different vision of how to travel. Silence, instead of noise, in the streets of the city; instead of the toxic squandering of fuel, the efficient use of renewable muscular energy. For the short solo trips that so many able-bodied city-dwellers prefer to make by car, the bicycle has always been a practical and convivial alternative.

Here, what is more, is a technology whose use reconciles virtue and pleasure. The bicycle opened the way to a new world of delight. 'The wheel and the rider are one, as the centaur and his horse-body were one, and when the flight begins it is an intensely personal affair'; so an American journalist wrote in 1897, in phrases which remind us that cyclists are to be numbered among the first of the cyborgs. Thirty years earlier, when the velocipede was yet to attain its modern form, a French enthusiast had proclaimed that 'the steel horse fills a gap in modern life. It is an answer not only to its needs, but also to its aspirations.' (Was it the prospect of these 'aspirations' that would lead Sartre to declare: 'Handing over a bank note is enough to make a bicycle belong to me, but my entire life is needed to realize this possession'?) In this utopian fusion of machine and body, metal and rubber become organic, and the horse-human steps from the realm of myth into the streets of your town.

However, the technological innovations that had made bicycle manufacture possible – the tangent-spoked wheel, the bush roller drive-chain, the pneumatic tyre – were very soon incorporated in early motor cars, which like bikes would grow ever more affordable thanks to assembly-line production. By the end of the twentieth century, transport utopia was generally imagined as an almost free ride, with the globe's vast oil reserves sold so cheaply that they will have lasted barely twenty decades. Cyclists in most affluent societies – in Britain, egregiously – must use roads now dominated by motor traffic. On 16 April 2011, the *Independent* launched a campaign to raise awareness of the consequent dangers, picturing on its front page twenty riders recently killed in collisions with cars, trucks and buses.

This campaign was one of several recent signals that the bike is back, and here to stay. Cycling rates in the UK have been very low. Britain, Australia and the USA were jointly rooted at the bottom of one international league table compiled in 2007. In top place was the Netherlands, where twenty-seven times as large a proportion of the population travelled regularly by bike; several other northern European nations had cycling rates ten or more times higher than Britain's. However, London, predictably the focus of the *Independent* article, has recently seen a significant increase in

cycling; it has been here that the bike has been most visible, materially and discursively. 'Boris Bikes', and the fanfare about them, marked official London's acceptance that a European capital that wants to look as if it is moving with the times must pretend to embrace the bike. Given its operational complexity and cost to the user, not to mention its sponsorship by Barclays, the scheme is a dubious avatar of the free-for-all White Bicycles of Amsterdam; but it does acknowledge that a 120-year-old machine now stands paradoxically in the vanguard of progress. Bike histories, bike prospects, and the revolutionary-Quixotic themes that attach to them, have a new centrality in cultural and political reflection.

Counter-cultural bicycle activism?

Here, I shall reflect especially on the belatedness and ambivalence of Britain's acceptance of the bicycle; and on whether there is any mileage left in the grander claims and projects of counter-cultural bicycle activism. 'The white bicycle is a provocation against capitalistic private property', Amsterdam's anarchist Provo movement declared in 1965.

Iain Sinclair, in a sardonic piece about recalcitrant Boris bikes and ill-mannered urban cyclists, wrote recently in the *London Review of Books* that 'the bike... suffered a long period (c. 1960–2000) of cultural invisibility'. His observation is partly true of Britain, where, as everywhere in Europe, car ownership and use were growing rapidly throughout that period; but during those same decades the bicycle was acquiring a central place in the ecology of many northern European towns and cities. Anyone who has visited Copenhagen or Berlin knows that in those capitals cyclists are encouraged and protected in ways still barely conceivable in London. Designated bicycle space, very often off-road, is separated from both cars and pedestrians; motorists take care not to drive or park in marked cycleways (and few cyclists ride on pavements or jump lights). If you have to mount a flight of steps to cross a canal in Copenhagen, you will often find a little ramp running alongside so riders can push their bikes smoothly up rather than having to bump them along or shoulder them. Much of the Danish and German countryside, like that of Sweden and the Netherlands, has been made amenable to safe riding, too. A sustained engagement with local environmental amenity, an imaginative conception of the pleasures that an enlightened administration can encourage – the weakness of these political and civic virtues in turbo-capitalist Britain is highlighted by our relative failure to provide for the bicycle.



Admittedly, the UK ‘national cycle network’ has been developed in the last dozen years by Sustrans, with lottery funding. This is still very patchy in terms of coverage, and (notwithstanding work to develop ride-to-school routes) most of it caters for cycling as a leisure pursuit rather than an everyday transport option. In Sussex, for example, the network includes the South Downs Way, quite useless as a practicable route between villages and towns; meanwhile much talk has produced little action to facilitate safe cycling in and between places where people live. Brighton is designated as one of ‘Cycling England’s Cycling Towns and Cities’. But even in Brighton, the mostly on-road cycleways are sometimes perilously narrow; and they give out at crucial points, plunging you back into traffic. Sustrans publications can betray a certain complacency about limited achievements (‘The Future Jobs Fund Maintenance team completed nearly a kilometre of path resurfacing south of Chiseldon’); more culpably, they tend to endorse a ‘Big Society’ fantasy that charitable and voluntary organizations are best placed to promote long-overdue changes in transport habits and urban habitats. Perhaps Sustrans will adopt a more critical tone if the coalition government goes on pulling the plug on kindred organizations: Cycling England, like the Sustainable Development Commission, has now lost its funding.

Cyclists in Britain may deplore the shortcomings of policy and provision, but no doubt we should be grateful for whatever we get, given the widespread hostility we attract. Zack Furness, in *One Less Car*, shows that the trope of ‘The Car Driver as Victim’ has been central to an increasingly strident anti-bike discourse in Britain and the USA over the last thirty years. The present government’s populist gabble about ‘ending the war on the motorist’ will cost the lives of pedestrians and cyclists (as well as drivers) if, as seems likely, it leads to an effective relaxation of speed limits. But it has its antecedents in the anti-bike views of former Labour Sports Minister Kate Hoey, as expressed in a piece in the *Mail on Sunday* (19 October 2003) headed ‘Lycra Louts: The Real Menace on Britain’s Roads Are Selfish, Aggressive, Lawbreaking and Infuriatingly Smug’. Cyclists, wrote Hoey, should pay ‘road tax’ – an opinion often heard, which ignores the fact that if payment reflected wear and tear of the highway, cyclists cause so little that their dues would not be worth collecting.



The absurd claim that cyclists, who very rarely cause even minor injuries, are the ‘real menace’ on the roads suggests an ideology under pressure. Hostility towards cyclists is a conspicuous recent inflection of a more general positioning or interpellation of the citizen as one who identifies him- or herself as a motorist, and is ‘pro-car’. This has deep roots in the political and material circumstances of the long postwar consumer boom, and is integral to the conceptions of prosperity and the good life that became hegemonic across the over-developed world in those years. Back in 1972, the French Communist Party joined the right-wing press in condemning a 10,000-strong *manifestation* of cyclists in Paris, which called for car use in the French capital to be curbed: the PCF saw this as ‘interference with the working man’s right to drive his car where he pleases’. Only in this historical framework can we gauge the full potential meanings of ‘vélorution’, for car culture epitomises the extent to which popular majorities, trade unions and mainstream left-of-centre parties have embraced forms and structures of consumption that eco-critics, to little effect so far, denounce as destructive and unsustainable.

Meanwhile, any cyclist in Britain and the USA is likely to become politicized in a more limited sense thanks to the immediate experience of taking to the roads: ‘At first bicycling is utilitarian, it’s just how you choose to get around ... but it becomes

political really quickly because it's hard to get around', to quote one cycling activist from Portland, Oregon. (Portland, exceptionally for the USA, now provides very well for bicycles, with a network of signposted car-free routes and space for bikes on buses, street-cars and the light railway; more people cycle there than in any American city of comparable size.) Just because it's so 'hard to get around', British and American riders are likely to identify themselves as cyclists: it's not just how you travel, it's who you are. In a town where it's completely normal to bicycle – Lund in Sweden, for example, where I was visiting just before I began writing this – most people who ride bikes are not cyclists. They wear no lycra. Their old-fashioned-looking machines are often innocent of the one really significant twentieth-century bike innovation, the derailleur gear, developed by Campagnolo in the late 1940s and since then much copied and widely adopted.

Identity politics

In Britain and the USA, by contrast, cycling is a strongly marked activity or identity. To be a cyclist here is in any case to stand out whether you want to or not. As imagined by the car-driver-as-victim, the bike rider is a rather improbable hybrid of urban-guerrilla-style bike messenger, hippy, and eco-chic fashionista with a job in the media or the City. (Sinclair echoes these prejudices in his *LRB* piece, but the death toll recorded in the *Independent* shows a more diverse demography: students, an RAF officer, a police support worker, an engineer...) One deep unspoken motivation for motorists' hostility is obvious: drivers know – even Ian McEwan's Mercedes-owning Henry Perowne (in his 2005 novel *Saturday*), most complacent of drivers, knows – that these are 'the last decades of the petroleum age'. But there are more immediate prompts and provocations. Too many urban cyclists ride rudely and in the wrong places, sometimes not showing due regard for the rights and needs of pedestrians. This in turn is a reflection of the danger and abuse cyclists face from some drivers even when we stick to our own allotted (and much-infringed) space. A dismal regime of mutual and reciprocal hostility prevails and the further development of dedicated bike routes becomes a matter of contention. In this dystopian dialectic, the hegemony of the motor car threatens to perpetuate itself for a few more years because too little, too late has been done to tame it hitherto.

Meanwhile, as with other modes of identity politics, the putative need to close ranks against a hostile majority has not stopped tensions developing inside the subculture(s) of the bicycle. Robert Penn's *It's All About the Bike* stands out, among the recent bike books I have been reading, for its lightly worn technical literacy and writerly fluency. But Penn's quest for perfect mechanical elegance, and his taste for speed, daring and endurance, tend to place him in the company of those cycling enthusiasts for whom riding signifies not a trip to market or a gentle spin, but the opportunity for technophilic consumption and extreme bodily feats, such as solo circumnavigation of the globe or a race down a 14 per cent gradient on the side of a rocky mountain: 'If you see somebody down on the course and bleeding, stop and give help – unless you're on a real good run.' That stress on combativeness and toughness was found in bicycle-messenger circles, and critics have pointed to its influence in the sometimes confrontational tactics of Critical Mass and other contemporary bike-activist campaigns, especially in the USA (Furness offers a full and nuanced account of this question). A dispiritingly 'hard' ethos of competition as much as conviviality, and speed rather than ambling, informs a surprising number of the mostly American contributions to *Cycling: Philosophy for Everyone*; it is also present in Paul Fournel's *Need for the Bike*, many of whose sketches celebrate the pains and rewards of close-to-the-limit physical exertion, in a virtually all-male French subculture whose unquestioned heroes are the *coureurs* of the gruelling long-distance stage-races. Fournel is associated with Oulipo, the French avant-garde writers' collective whose best-known member was Georges Perec. Reading *Need for the Bike*, I thought of Perec's *W*, in which obsessional and ruthless athletic competition is the basis of a fascistic social order; and then I thought of the Olympic

Velodrome in London. Here is the bike as fetishized speed-machine, not the antithesis but the very sign of turbo-culture's conquest of mind and body: flesh is imagined as steel, rather than vice versa. For every potential cyclist who might be encouraged onto the roads by such images, a dozen must be put off.

The bicycle speaks much more attractively to everyday aspirations in its use for leisurely touring: a day out in the country, a week by Irish lakes or in the woods and fields of Normandy. Holidaymaking is already the biggest 'industry' in rich countries, and a green economy that had broken with the systemic compulsion to grow forever would leave its citizens more free time. The hedonism of cycling, which comes to the fore in touring, also suffuses the bike's everyday uses, blurring the distinction between utility and pleasure; and this is central to the new cultural imaginary that it might help foster. But slowish riding for fun is sometimes presented, and sometimes presents itself, as a relic of bygone days. Penn refers to 'the dying breed of British cyclists setting off to a youth hostel with a neatly folded map and a thermos of soup'. Clare Balding's recent televised bike ride around Britain was framed by references to the cycle-touring guides written by Harold Briercliffe in the 1940s. The book of the television series reproduces scores of old black-and-white photos, postcards and cigarette cards; the cover is taken from a vintage London Transport poster.

This aesthetic suggests that the dream of riding peacefully down English lanes is strictly a dream of the past, and has been fading ever since the early 1950s when there were 12 million regular cyclists in Britain. To the extent that this is true, it might prompt regret and anger, rather than nostalgia. Cycle touring could do with more combative television advocates, who would deplore the continuing lack of safe, continuous routes in most of rural Britain, and point out that cyclists here will struggle to get to the start of their holidays by rail because new rolling stock has very little bike space. Even a solo rider cannot take a touring bicycle on most trains in and around the capital at busy times; a group will find it difficult to do so at any hour of the day or week (again, Denmark and Germany offer an enlightened contrast). Here is another paradox of the temporalities of the bike: it signifies a notional desire to return to what we have almost lost, but we have done our best to block the path back.

Even these retro-ideological images reflect the fact that the bicycle is politically important because its use signifies resistance to one-dimensional narratives of progress. The counter-culture of bicycle activism, like the wider green movement that was also emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s, drew on arguments about the unsustainability of capitalism articulated by thinkers such as André Gorz and E.F. Schumacher. The anarchists of Amsterdam could acknowledge the quixotism of their gestures: 'Provo realises that it will lose in the end, but it cannot pass up the chance to make at least one more heartfelt attempt to provoke society.' But 1973 was the year of the embargo and subsequent price rise imposed by the oil-producing countries of OPEC; to those with eyes to see, 'peak oil' was already visible on the horizon. The pollution you could smell in car-infested town centres already pointed to the intractable dangers of using the biosphere as a sink. In the four decades since then, the primary argument of *vélo-critique*, that the way we use fossil fuels cannot be sustained, has become ever more ineluctable. That's one reason why people choose to ride, and why their eccentric choice is nowadays patronised even by the authorities of the neoliberal metropolis.

The bicycle signifies utopia as well as critique: 'The white bicycle is a symbol of simplicity and cleanness in contrast to the vanity and foulness of the authoritarian car. In other words: A BIKE IS SOMETHING, BUT ALMOST NOTHING!' 'Simplicity' connotes the alternative forms of pleasure that might flourish in a society no longer based on ever-growing levels of wasteful consumption. Cycling of course does not constitute anything like a total alternative: precisely in those social democracies which have been most imaginative in their embrace of the benefits it can confer, it proves for the time being altogether compatible with the motor car, and with consumer

capitalism. Those of us who must take to the far less bike-friendly roads of Britain can console ourselves with the thought that adversity keeps our radicalism warm. But wherever people ride it, the bicycle is a powerful emblem of another way of being; more than an emblem, cycling enacts what it represents. At once utilitarian and ecstatic, it unsettles those distinctions between labour and pleasure which the present order polices and requires. In its intimate symbiosis with the rider's body, this machine which makes no noise and burns no fuel can redress and reverse the mechanical colonization of soma and psyche that Marcuse wrote of:

Mechanization has also 'saved' libido, the energy of the Life Instincts – that is, has barred it from previous modes of realization. This is the kernel of truth in the romantic contrast between the modern traveler and the wandering poet or artisan, between assembly line and handicraft, [between] the sailboat and the outboard motor, etc. True, this romantic pre-technical world was permeated with misery.... Still, there was a 'landscape', a medium of libidinal experience which no longer exists.

Cyclists imagine they are keeping open the roads that lead into this vanished landscape.

Note

1. Discussed by Zack Furness in *One Less Car*. In writing this, I have drawn on the following recent books and articles: Jane Eastoe, foreword by Clare Balding, *Britain By Bike*, Batsford, London, 2010, 217 pp., 978 1 9063 88713; Paul Fournel, trans. and intro. Allan Stoekl, *Need for the Bike*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln NE and London, 2010, xi + 150 pp., 978 0 80326 909 5; Zack Furness, *One Less Car: Bicycling and the Politics of Automobility*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2010, xi + 348 pp., 978 1 59213 612 4 hb., 978 1 59213 613 1 pb.; Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza and Michael W. Austin, eds, *Cycling: Philosophy for Everyone*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2010, xiii + 273 pp., 978 1 4443 3027 4; Robert Penn, *It's All About the Bike: The Pursuit of Happiness on Two Wheels*, Particular Books (Penguin), London, 2010, 199 pp., 978 1 846 1 14262 8; Iain Sinclair, 'The Raging Peloton', *London Review of Books*, 20 January 2011, pp. 3–8; Sustrans, *The Hub* 16, Spring 2011, February 2011.

Quotations from the Amsterdam Provo will be found in *By Any Means Necessary: Outlaw Manifestos and Ephemera*, ed. P. Stansill and D.Z. Mairowitz, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1971; the passage from Marcuse is from Chapter 3 of his *One Dimensional Man*, London and New York: Routledge, 1964.

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